



Testimony of Kaitlin Comet
Member, Connecticut Prevention Network and
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In SUPPORT of
HB 5434 AN ACT CONCERNING THE REGULATION OF CANNABIS
General Law Committee, Thursday, February 22nd, 2023

Senator Maroney, Representative D'Agostino, Senator Cicarella, Representative Rutigliano and Members of the General Law Committee, my name is Kaitlin Comet and I am a Program Coordinator at The Hub. We are the designated Regional Behavioral Health Action Organization (RBHAO) for Southwestern CT (SW CT), a division of RYASAP and I am here in my capacity today as a member of the Connecticut Prevention Network (CPN). CPN is the coalition of the five Regional Behavioral Health Action Organizations and other prevention organizations who are focused on substance use and mental health prevention efforts.

I am here today to support HB 5435 AN ACT CONCERNING THE REGULATION OF CANNABIS.

Magnitude & Burden of Cannabis Use

- Cannabis is one of the most widely used substances in youth and young adults, especially those under the age of 18; despite the current laws prohibiting cannabis use for those under the age of 21.
- Approximately 1 in 10 people who use cannabis will become addicted. If an individual were to use cannabis before the age of 18, the rate of cannabis dependency addiction rises to 1 in 6. These rates can only be expected to rise with the legal use of cannabis.
- In 2021, the percentage of people who used cannabis in the past month was highest in young adults (ages 18-25) in our state.
- In Southwestern CT, rates of cannabis use and especially cannabis vaping has increased in youth. Cannabis use typically increases with increasing grade levels. It is also the second most used substance in the region by youth, the first being alcohol.
- The use of cannabis, including vaping and especially in youth, can have detrimental effects on physical and emotional development. This includes: impaired driving, loss of IQ points, delayed motor functioning, increase in serious mental health conditions and symptoms (including anxiety & depression), development or worsening of psychosis, development of a substance use disorder, suicide attempts, and for mothers who use during pregnancy, birth defects.
- In states that have legalized cannabis, there has been an increase in traffic accidents, emergency room visits and fatalities. In our state, over the last few years, hospital admissions for cannabis intoxication in adults, young adults and even children have increased. Emergency room visits for cannabis-induced psychosis, cannabis overdose and overdose in children consuming cannabis edibles that look like candy are rising. We are seeing a rise in calls to our poison control center for this as well.

THC Potency & Caps

- Today's cannabis is unlike decades ago and contains higher and more addictive levels of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). This is the psychoactive and mind-altering substance from the cannabis plant. Research suggests that products above 10% of THC has been associated with negative mental health impacts. It is also the substance within cannabis that is most lacking in recognition and regulation, especially in the SB 1202 bill – AN ACT CONCERNING RESPONSIBLE AND EQUITABLE REGULATION OF ADULT-USE CANNABIS
- Currently, this law caps THC levels at 30% for plant matter and 60% for concentrates. However, the law exempts pre-filled vape cartridges from these THC caps, despite this being a popular method of cannabis use in youth and young adults. In fact, many of these concentrates exceed the current THC cap limit. Some vapes have been tested to have over 90% THC.
- In our state, we see vape use in youth rising. Local youth surveys in our region show that half of youth who are vaping, are vaping THC. This means they are ingesting extremely high levels of potent THC.
- We need to regulate potency caps to ensure that accessible products are not stronger and more addictive. This includes applying caps to all THC products, including vape products and cannabis edibles. Currently, cannabis edible products have high levels of THC in one product. This could be up to 6 servings in a single product, like a gummy, brownie, or candy bar. Yet, these products are being easily sold and distributed but not regulated. It is important that the THC loopholes in our current cannabis law are addressed and closed.

Perception of Harm: Advertising & Health Warning Labels

- According to many studies, the perception of how harmful cannabis use can be in youth has decreased. This means that too many people believe that it is relatively or completely safe to frequently use cannabis, even for youth. This is despite scientific studies proving the potential harms of cannabis use.
- There is low awareness and education on the harms of potent cannabis products and the misuse of such, especially by youth. These potential dangers need to be more obvious in health warning labels for cannabis products.
- This influences parents as well. When parents are not aware or properly informed, they are less likely to disapprove cannabis use. Local youth surveys in our region have shown that youth are more likely to use cannabis if they have a low perception of parent approval.
- We need informed advertising, and larger health warning labels on cannabis products to display health risks.
- Advertisements which promote and encourage the sale of products with high THC potency are highly visible not only in urban areas, but also within local shops such as convenience stores. This is especially dangerous when addictive and potent products such as delta-8/9 are also promoted and easily attained, despite it being illegal.
- Many retailer storefronts, including those without a license, promote enticing advertising, specifically targeting and marketing to youth. There needs to be more information, education and obviously appropriate health warning labels to meet these marketing tactics.

Regulation & Compliance Checks

- Many aspects of the cannabis law require monitoring and regulation. Compliance checks should be conducted at retail establishments and retailers that are out of compliance or who are unlicensed, should be heavily fined and monitored.
- Some towns in our region have conducted compliance checks in their work and found many unlicensed stores are selling cannabis and THC products. Many stores are also out of compliance, including selling cannabis products to youth and high THC products that are not regulated to the current THC caps.
- Many local retailers have been repeatedly cited for underage sales but there is little to no change, showing that the current low fines are not proving preventative or useful.
- We need to have a prohibition for any gas station, convenience store or any other non-licensed cannabis retailer to sell THC products. There should also be continued regulation for this and even stronger compliance consequences. We know of at least one store that has been cited multiple times for out of compliance but there has been no change. We also hear that for some non-licensed retailers, it is worth it to receive the financial loss due to fines because sales for THC/cannabis products make up for it.

In conclusion, we know the dangers of cannabis and THC misuse, especially for youth and we need to regulate this now. Misinformation, out of compliance stores, enticing advertising, insufficient warning labels, little to no regulation of THC caps and everything thus discussed are contributing to a culture shift happening in our state and it is becoming dangerous for our youth.

Prevention dollars through cannabis sales tax revenue will not start for at least another year with the potential of waiting longer. Currently, Local Prevention Councils (LPCs) focus is on reducing vaping, between 12 and 18 years old, and there are no allocated dollars in the near future for cannabis prevention. By passing this bill, we can position ourselves to become more proactive.

Let's become a prime example of safely legalizing cannabis compared to other states. We are so grateful to see this committee understanding the risks and harm that have been happening and will continue to happen without this bill being passed, and especially without the support of current prevention dollars. This will be a huge step in the right direction of prevention for our state and a healthier community for our youth. Can we count on you to become a champion in passing this bill?

I am available to answer any questions and look forward to working with the committee on this issue further.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

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Sources

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National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 2021

Connecticut Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

Local Youth Survey Data, 2021

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Connecticut Poison Control Center, 2021

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2021